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ABSTRACT

Analysis of questionnaires completed by 27 successful Canadian women indicated that these women experienced satisfaction in carrying out research, publishing, and artistic and engineering production, while at the same time maintaining a healthy feeling of equality in a career path. Patterns of career growth indicated inconsistent vertical development in a number of cases, the importance of mentors in the work place, pressures to conform to stereotypical female roles, and particularly, if married, in carrying out household responsibilities. Respondents reported "being a female" was as important to them as work recognition and contributing to the welfare of others. Among conclusions were the following: mothers' expectations for their daughters were a significant factor in daughter success; over half felt that luck had played a major role in their success; and many successful women decided not to have children and those who did have children usually hired full time help. (Contains 23 references.) (Author/DB)

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Coping Strategies of Successful Canadian Women

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Abstract

Lengthy questionnaires were completed by 27 successful Canadian women. Findings pointed to satisfaction in carrying out research, publishing, artistic and engineering production, while at the same time maintaining a healthy feeling of equality in a career path. Patterns of career growth indicated inconsistent vertical development in a number of cases, the importance of mentors in the work place, pressures to conform to stereotypical female roles, and particularly, if married, in carrying out household responsibilities. Respondents reported "being a female" was important as was work recognition and contributing to the welfare of others.

Introduction

Most research concerning the achievement of females compares females to their male counterparts, thereby measuring female performance with a male yardstick. More research is needed which examines females as a group, dealing with realities of the female experience through educational processes and into the work place. Kerr (1985) documents this in examining the lives of a class of gifted females, her classmates, fifteen years after graduation. Even recognition of giftedness at an early age, and the provision of specialized programs, did not seem to consistently produce women of great accomplishment in this cohort.

Studies focusing on gifted, talented females as well as earlier studies of successful career women, suggest that there are several key factors which impact on the achievement patterns of females. Factors such as self-esteem, career paths, mentor relationships, and cultural expectations for women, all have a profound effect on accomplishments.

Keown and Keown (1985) reported that successful women in their study made a conscious decision to make "being a female" an asset and to deny limitations based on gender. Steinem (1992) agreed that the road to success for women begins with an internal journey to feelings of equality, and the need "to demystify the forces that have told us what we **should be** before we can value what we **are**" (p. 109).

The female **perception of success** was seen as a factor in its attainment. Many studies agreed that salary, while being a necessary component, was not a prime motivator for the success of women (Froggatt & Hunter, 1980; Keown & Keown, 1985). In keeping with the tendency for females to link self-worth with a caring attitude, success was also associated with contributing to others and to an "adept ability to interface career and domestic roles" (Froggatt & Hunter, 1985). Whereas males typically viewed success in terms of the work environment alone, women tended to include all aspects of their lives in their assessment of personal success.

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Certain **personal characteristics** were evident in a great number of the women who achieve vocational prominence. Researchers mentioned intensity, the ability to "fall in love with an idea" (Kerr, 1985, p. 69), to have an "intense love affair with their work" (Froggatt & Hunter, 1980, p. 180), or to follow "a powerful Dream" (Daniels, 1985, p. 429). Northcutt (1991) described the successful women in her study as being consistently responsible, competent, and committed to their careers. Flexibility was also cited as being an important quality in career women, allowing them to use situations to their advantage and to manage the dual-career aspect of their daily lives. Combine these factors with an ability to interact well with others, and one has a powerful recipe for success (Keown & Keown, 1985).

Analysis of Study

In a recent study by the author, twenty-seven successful Canadian women completed a questionnaire designed to reveal coping strategies, environmental factors, and personal characteristics that contribute to high levels of achievement in a variety of prestigious and financially rewarding careers. Questions were both computer-rated and open-ended. Frequency distributions were used to determine percentages for computer-scored items. Procedures of qualitative analysis were used for the open-ended items, including examination of themes, the constant comparative analysis of themes in depth, and the search for nonconforming cases. Responses to questions in the study provide insights into the various factors of success for women.

The successful women looked back on family life and almost unanimously agreed that both parents had contributed positive values to their development. "My mother was influential as an independently minded individual who developed and maintained her own career. I grew up knowing that women could do anything" reported one woman. "My father emphasized upward mobility, the importance of striving for excellence and rugged individualism," said another.

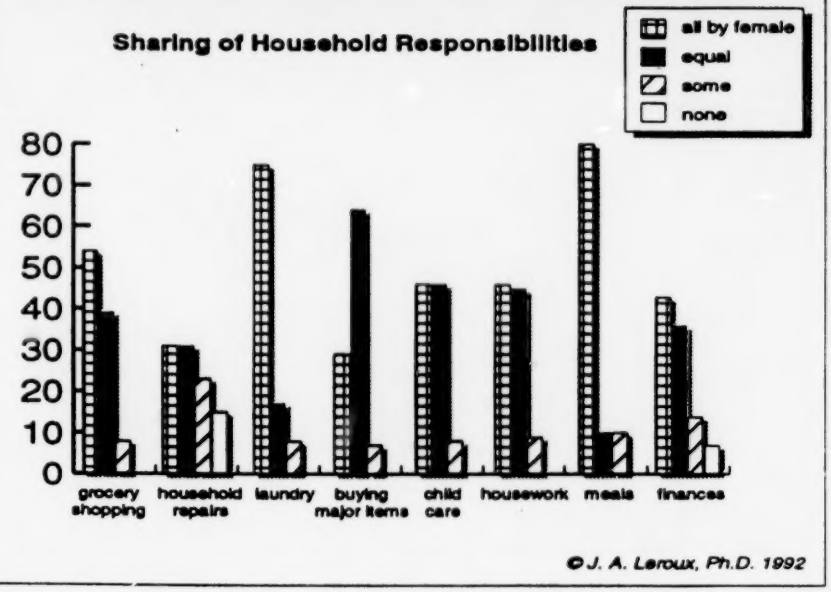
However, a different perception was voiced by several successful women; the mother's lack of career being influential. These women were determined "not to end up like her". As one woman said, "I inherited her stymied ambitions". Daugthers of working mothers appeared to feel empowered by mothers who were self-sufficient and who valued education for themselves and their children. When mothers were at home, there was sometimes an inverse relationship to the role modelling.

The respondents identified mentor-type relationships, particularly from supportive husbands and individual men in the work place who helped them forge new paths in their careers. As one said, "I had mentors - early training in business from very tough, demanding superiors." Another agreed: "A series of senior members of the Canadian research community worked with me and supported my development." As previous studies have shown, the need for committed individuals who take a sincere and strenghtening interest in the aspirations of gifted females was clearly portrayed in the responses of the experienced women.

Several of the women stressed the importance of hiring outside help to do the housekeeping and child care. This was described as "the only reasonable solution no matter what the cost!" The hiring of housekeepers leaves one to wonder how much

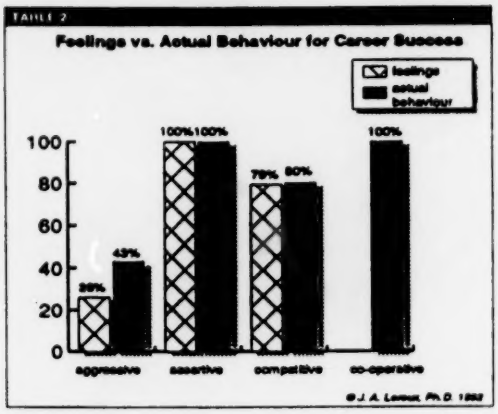
husbands actually shared in household responsibilities. In the breakdown of responsibilities it was evident that traditional duties such as meal preparation, laundry, and grocery shopping, were primarily women's domain, leaving the question open on how much traditional roles have really changed. (See Table 1.)

TABLE 1



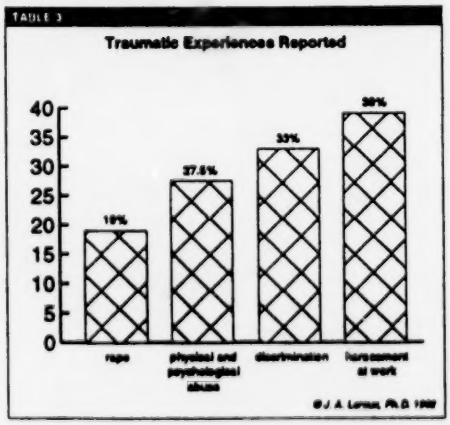
An on-going sense of striving was evident in the successful women. While 100 per cent described themselves as successful, over half of them attributed success, in varying degrees, to good luck. They went on to say that this luck was accompanied by effort and the ability to recognize opportunity. "Fate and fortune played a significant part of my achievements. I was in the right place at the right time and always said I was born clutching golden horseshoes" commented one woman. "Being open to what fate offers is important," added another.

At the same time, over half of the experienced women thought a woman must be "twice as good as a man in the same position" in order to succeed in her career. Assertiveness was listed as an important quality for success, as was cooperation. (See Table 2.)



In searching for self and success, these young women appeared to feel that self had been the neglected factor. "Having put so much energy into a career I've neglected my emotional needs and find myself living a very unbalanced life" said one successful woman.

A variety of life stressors were reported. Relocation to another part of the country (74%), or to another country entirely (52%), and coping with the death of a close friend (59%), and caring for family members in time of illness (80%) were some of the events described. In the work place, 39% had been victims of sexual harassment, 33% reported some form of discrimination, 64% indicated that male colleagues tended to feel threatened when they were with a woman who was more successful in the career than they were. In addition, 19% had been raped at some point in their lives, 11.5% had been physically abused, and another 15% reported psychological abuse. (See Table 3).



This group, however, did not feel defenceless in the face of stressful situations. They appeared to tap into an inner strength, and transform adversity into life affirmation. Their personal intelligence and determination combined with a powerful connectedness with friends enables them to face each crisis and continue to achieve.

Many of the women acknowledged the importance of self- knowledge, talking through anxieties with trusted friends, and using difficult experiences as springboards for growth. There was a consistent, strong pattern in the perceptions of the importance of relationships.

Implications and Conclusions

Several important issues were in this preliminary study, and may be summarized as follows:

1) Results suggest that mothers' expectations for their daughters are a significant factor for success, regardless of the employment status of the mother; fathers were perceived as role models of vocational success for female children.
2) Although the majority of the females in the study chose a career outside of the home early in life, most did not expect to achieve the levels of success which they later attained. For this group of women, patterns of career growth, less consistently vertical responses to career development, and home responsibilities all seemed to result in a legacy of drift. Careers happened to them rather than always being controlled by them.
3) Introduction of appropriate, gender-sensitive vocational counseling was clearly identified as a means of expanding the career choices of women today. Opportunities to explore the concerns of career and family options were strongly endorsed by this group of women.
4) The successful women in this study most often found mentors in employers or other superiors in the work environment. Friends, family, and teachers also played significant supportive roles in the career paths of these highly achieving women.
5) Although the women almost all saw themselves as successful, over half felt that luck had played a major role in their success.
6) Success for these women was most often defined in terms of contributing to the welfare of others or to the community at large. The opportunity to work in their chosen field, to gain recognition from this work, and to contribute to the welfare of others or community was also very significant.
7) Pressures for women to maintain a stereotypical role still exist; often male discomfort creates responses and then takes the form of harassment.
8) Many successful women decide not to have children; those who do usually hire full-time help. It is questionable as to how much husbands actually share child care and household responsibilities, even though the marriage is described as a partnership.

How does being highly able or gifted affect this group of women? On the positive side it appeared that they knew themselves and their personal values intensively. In other words, they had a strong sense of their own abilities, and knew how to tap into that internal strength when necessary. As a whole they appeared to have a "survivor instinct" which carried them through various trials, traumas and life stresses. They appeared to rely on this instinct from early ages onward.

These individuals were united in their drive to make a contribution, to benefit others through research, to produce something of value to others. They worked hard to be "gifted givers", those who returned to families or their communities many of the gifts they themselves enjoyed. In their concern for others, they refused to blame men in general for obstacles in their career paths. In so doing they did not see themselves in competition with others, but rather partners in making their society a little better place to live.

On the negative side, the respondents recognized the stereotypes of female roles or behaviours that they had to overcome. They reported they worked hard and planned carefully to combine their professional and personal lives. Family commitments were accepted as necessary with few regrets for the additional burden. Though they decried the pressure to be "Superwomen", they often described themselves as "workaholics", pushing themselves to accomplishments that even they had not dreamed of or planned.

The women in this study overcame obstacles through sheer determination, a perseverance that typifies the gifted individuals in our society. When career problems became too great, many reported they were grateful they could turn to cherished friends "to talk things out". Female connectedness was a valuable asset in coping with problems.

As one woman said,

> Successful women pay a very high price for their accomplishments but we must never lose faith in ourselves.

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